

AUGUST 28, 1986

Winter ended in this part of the Shortgrass Country on the 26th of May. After it had rained a week and the ranch roads became impassable, we concluded a mother cow feeding exercise that had started the first week of December of '85. All through the month of June these cool, soaking rains were to fall. The countryside responded in a lush greenery that cheered us all. High spirits reigned over the pasturelands.

August has also been a wet month. We've recorded all the way from a low of 1/2 inch to a high of 4 inches in a competition gauge we have over on the highway. More and more we are putting up those open-choke, flair-mouthed tubes. I think the extra moisture they catch makes you a better rancher and it certainly makes ruling the floor at the coffee houses a simpler matter.

One of the big changes from the latest rains was a shift in the grasshopper population. Until it'd rained, the pastures we were resting were overrun with grasshoppers and the pastures we had stocked were infested with needlegrass.

Well, where we got the big rains the needles were knocked off and washed away, but lo and behold, just as soon as the needles were gone, the grasshoppers spread everywhere. I don't know how long it took them to move their ranges. For a couple of days at least, I was busy getting the needles out of my britches legs and socks. It was probably over a week before I'd stand without kicking every time a little piece of grass pricked my skin.

I was sure up on my needlegrass knowledge. In July, I'd heard that hair goat operators were spraying their herds with something called "red oil" to cut down on contamination. In the same month, we'd spent 85 cents a head shearing our lambs' faces, bellies and legs. I know that you straight hollow horn herders don't want to hear too much about my needlegrass problems, but if you ever get anything so bad that it'll put your calves' eyes out and wean them at the same time, I'll promise to listen to your grief.

Before I figured out why the grasshoppers were so sensitive to needlegrass, I had to capture about 12 head and examine them real close. On a grasshopper, I learned, the damage is the reverse that it is on a sheep. A woolie gets the spines underneath her eyelid. If you'll think about it a grasshopper is so pop-eyed that he can't keep the needles out of his eyes. So whether he is a jumper or a flyer, he has to have a landing place free of stickers. Flying grasshoppers sure have to be careful, because their wings will suck everything up in their faces.

Range experts haven't learned that needlegrass will control grasshoppers. All these years I'd been waiting for some ocean bird like a sea gull to swoop in and devour them. Now we've got a natural remedy. Needlegrass is spreading over all of the country. I think the grasshoppers' days are numbered.